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BARTH'S *THE SOT-WEED FACTOR* – A CASE OF HYPERTEXTUALITY

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In *Palimpsests*, Gerard Genette argues that all literary texts are inevitably hypertextual (1997: 1). The author defines "hypertextuality" as one of the five types of transtextuality or textual transcendence embracing all possible kinds of relationships between texts. The hypertext, as it is suggested by Genette, can be easily visualised as a palimpsest, an old parchment reused many times but still carrying the traces of the previously erased texts (1997: 399). The remaining traces, if deciphered by a competent reader, grant not only a better and fuller understanding of the text, but change the very act of reading into a game. A relational reading has the further merit of generating complex links between various discourses, and what seems even more important, forces the reader to be vigilant and active in his efforts to uncover subsequent layers of the textual palimpsest.

Genette provides an even more precise definition of the phenomena describing the hypertext as "any text derived from a previous text, either through simple transformation or through indirect transformation" (1997: 9). An earlier text which the hypertext imitates or transforms is called "hypotext". The distinction between simple transformation and imitation is not without relevance as it enables the author to classify works on the basis of their hypertextual relations. The proposed classification involves redefining a few of the most widely used literary forms, among which there are: parody, pastiche, satire, caricature, burlesque and travesty.

Genette admits that he has a special interest in what he calls "massively hypertextual works", (1997: 5) that is, the works which explicitly rely on other texts, re-writing them on various levels. There is little doubt as to the "massively hypertextual" nature of Barth's novel *The sot-weed factor*. The numerous transtextual links have been established and discussed by critics interested in

Barth's work. Patricia Tobin, in her brilliant book *The anxiety of continuance*, points out that *The sot-weed factor* is:

> ... an echo of the multiple – of Fielding's foundlings and male virgins, of Smollett's pirate ships and his gentleman with valet, of Defoe's shipwreck and Crusoe's fortunate find in Friday, of Tristram Shandy's abbreviated member and Uncle Toby's wound, not to mention extra-English borrowings to Voltaire, Cervantes, and Rabelais" (Tobin 1992: 56-57).

Two of the hypotexts she mentions here, namely, Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Voltaire's *Candide,* seem inseparably interwoven with Barth's work and these two texts will be subject to a closer scrutiny in the present paper.

In order to answer the question what kind of relations bind Barth's hypertext to its hypotexts we have to use Genette's re-definitions of two generic terms: parody and pastiche. Parody, argues Genette, distorts the text by means of a minimal transformation. The etymology of the word *parody* derives from the combination of its two components, that is, *ode* and *para*. *Ode* means 'a chant', and *para* – 'along', 'beside', which gives us a literal meaning – 'singing off key', 'in another voice', 'in counterpoint', and if we go a little further, it can also imply deforming a song, or transposing a melody. The target of a parody, is usually some formal or semantic constraint and the intention of the transformation is satirical. Pastiche, in turn, is defined as the imitation of a style and the thematic motives it involves, without any satirical intent. The term appeared first in the terminology of painting and its source was the Italian word *pasticcio*, translated into English as 'paste'. At first it described a mixture of imitations and then a particular imitation (Genette 1997: 82-89). The main focus of pastiche is to establish the text's idiolect, "a matrix of imitation", a model of competence which, according to Genette, consists of both, the form of expression and the content. Such a matrix serves the writer as a source of variations which enable him to re-write and re-read a hypertext, often in unpredictable ways (Genette 1997: 81).

The juxtaposition of parody and pastiche, if applied to Barth's novel, proves that *The sot-weed* is a rather hard nut to crack as a hypertextual case. Genette admits himself that Barth's novel is a somewhat "complex case of literary acrobatics" (1997: 211). He classifies it as a period pastiche, and not of one, as the French critic points out, but of several stylistic types. *The sot-weed factor* cannot be treated as a parody for there is no satirical intention behind Barth's attempt to re-write his palimpsestous models. Barth consciously mixes various genres having in mind Fielding's often quoted definition of the novel: "comic epic-poem in prose" (Fielding 1961: 7). As a result, *The sot-weed factor* is a combination of a picaresque, historical romance, philosophical farce, a realistic novel, a pastoral, a mock-epic and a *Bildungsroman*, to name only the most conspicuous generic elements (Tharpe 1973: 53).

The patient uncovering of its subsequent hypertextual layers helps to situate the novel within the whole history of story-telling. Barth approaches literary tradition by playing with and against the established conventions. If we follow closely his labyrinth of palimpsestous traces, we will be able to see in which direction the novelistic genre is going and how it affects the novel-writing today.

As a period pastiche, *The sot-weed factor* goes back to the eighteenth century. Barth himself points out the first link with Henry Fielding as his intention is to make the plot "even fancier than *Tom Jones*" (Enck 1965: 7). The author seems particularly charmed by the artfulness with which Fielding creates his complex narrative structures. He shares his admiration with Arthur Murphy, Fielding's first biographer, who wrote of *Tom Jones*:

> ... there is no fable which affords, in its solution, such artful states of suspense, such beautiful turns of surprise, such unexpected incidents, and such sudden discoveries, sometimes apparently embarrassing, but always promising the catastrophe, and eventually promoting the completion of the whole (Crane 1968: 68).

Barth's peculiar penchant for the ostentatious excess in story-telling seems to prove that what he is really interested in, is the self-revealing nature of the plot treated as a device which is essentially artificial. However, the significance of Barth's use of Fielding as a hypotext for his pastiche will not be clear if we ignore Aristotle's formulation of the term "plot".

In *Poetics,* Aristotle explains the concept as "the representation of the action, the combination of the incidents, or things done in the story" (1991: 683). For him, the plot is not a conspiracy against nature, but a denial of chaos and excessive diversity of life. "To be beautiful", argues the philosopher, "a living creature and every whole made up of parts must present a certain order in its arrangement of parts" (Aristotle 1991: 684). The events of which the plot is composed form a temporal sequence but they are more than just successive; each new turn of the plot must be justified by some other element of which it is either the cause or the consequence. The plot enriches facts by making them interdependent; its sequences are chronological but they are also structural, spatial as well as temporal. The full logic of a narrative is not to be grasped before the narrative is complete, when we are free to reverse its flow and justify what comes earlier by what we now know was planned to come later.

Thus the Aristotelian plot must necessarily constitute a "complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole" (Aristotle 1991: 685). The whole of the story is built by the clear boundaries between the beginning, the middle and the end. The plot cannot begin nor end at any point. In order to fulfil its mimetic function it must obey the principle of cause and effect. The

connections between the events are established by the unifying perspective allowing for the selection of only those experiences which have a certain value for the story (Eco 1989: 111). According to Aristotle, there are three obligatory elements of the plot: *peripety* which is a change from one state of things within the play to its opposite, *discovery* defined as "a change from ignorance to knowledge", and *suffering* – "an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as murders, tortures, woundings and the like" (Aristotle 1991: 685). A well-construed plot will necessarily evolve from *complication* which represents all the action from the beginning of the story to the change in the hero's fortune towards *dénouement* starting from the change and leading to the end of the narrative.

Aristotle perceived the plot as the most important part of tragedy and a superior way of reproducing experience. He endowed the plot with an important task of affecting human emotions. The combination of the events, action and thought was to direct the audience's feelings first towards pity and fear and then towards a catharsis of these emotions (Aristotle 1991: 686).

Barth's delight in Fielding's plots is sincere as long as they oppose and question the rules proposed by Aristotle. As episodic plots, they are more dynamic and constantly violate our emotional expectations by interacting with our desires concerning the states of affairs and the characters' conduct. Although the main protagonists of *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews* possess all the necessary qualities of tragic heroes, we do not fear for or pity them. The unexpected complications of the incidents, each bringing even more undeserved suffering for the "virtuous" characters, the multiplicity of surprising turns, the contrary lines of probability, the mistaken judgements, the new circumstances and happy coincidences added *in infinitum*, the sudden appearances of new characters and disappearances of others, the sophisticated intrigues, many climaxes and apparent resolutions within the course of the novel – all this evokes in us the feelings of disbelief and confusion (cf. Crane 1968: 35). Towards the end of the narrative, the reader's expectations are less and less serious as he is made to realise that what he experiences is very distant from the principles governing reality. As if sensing the reader's growing doubts, the narrator of *Tom Jones* warns him against too hasty judgements:

> First then we warn thee not too hastily condemn any of the incidents in this our history, as impertinent and foreign to our main design, because thou dost not immediately conceive in what manner such incident may conduce to that design. This work may, indeed, be considered as a great creation of our own; and for a little reptile of a critic to presume to find fault with any of its parts, without knowing the manner in which the whole is connected, and before comes to the final catastrophe, is most presumptuous absurdity (Fielding 1966: 467).

It is worth noting that the narrator interferes whenever the events seem to escape the rules of logic. The turns of the action are justified either by the workings of capricious Fortune or by the intentions of the author who takes the whole responsibility for his creation. Despite the apparent complexity of the plot, Fielding preserves the Aristotelian strict dependence of cause and effect for only they warrant the creation of the world that is ordered and comic. His characters know their place in this world and even when they act irrationally, the narrator always provides a ready explanation for their unruly behaviour. When Tom Jones betrays his beloved Sophia with Molly Seargrim and Mrs Waters, the narrator puts the blame on his youth and inexperience, whereas his love affair with Lady Bellaston is a matter of ill-conceived honour. On the one hand, the overt presence of the narrator's commentary helps to "keep the plot within the bounds of possibility and probability" (Fielding 1966: 364). The narrator serves as a "guide who, not content with taking us 'behind the scenes of this great theatre of nature' (Fielding 1967: 299), feels that he must explain everything which is to be found there" (Watt 1968: 29). He plays the role of Ariadne who provides the confused reader with the clue of thread. On the other hand, his explanatory gestures reinforce the impression that we are immersed wholly in the fictional construct whose structure enjoys a considerable degree of autonomy and the integrity of an artifact:

> But so matters fell out, and so I must relate them; and if any reader is shocked at their appearing unnatural, I cannot help it. I must remind such persons, that I am not writing a system, but a history, and I am not obliged to reconcile every matter to the received notions concerning truth and nature (Fielding 1966: 579).

This way of writing, as it has been pointed out by Robert Alter, perfectly unites the fictional events and the theorising (1975: 134). "In the narrative itself", says Alter, "there is a seamless connection between narration and wide-ranging reflection, where at every moment the ostentatiously manipulated fictional materials are set in an elaborate grid of convention, genre, literary allusion, authorial intention" (1973: 134). Labyrinthine as it may appear, the novel has nevertheless its internal symmetry. The beginning introduces the characters and the main conflict; the middle, containing many instances of Aristotelian peripety, discovery and complication, leads us through the numerous improbabilities and probabilities to the final denouement miraculously resolving all tensions, conflicts and the apparent inconsistencies within the narrative. Fielding's work is planned very meticulously and when we get to the end of the narrative, we

> ... are amazed to find, that of so many incidents there should be so few superfluous; that in such variety of fiction there should be so great probability; and

that so complex a tale should be perspicuously conducted, and with perfect unity of design" (Crane 1968: 68).

It seems thus that Fielding only slightly shakes the foundations of the Aristotelian structure as his construct still sets on the firm grounds built by the author of *Poetics*. If he sins against the rules established by his ancient predecessor, he does it only through the lack of the Aristotelian measure and delight in the comic possibilities which only the episodic plot can grant.

Barth displays the same preference for the episodic plot which opposes the Aristotelian principles of the unity of action. He goes, however, much further than Fielding as he realises that "no man's life story as rule is ever one story with a coherent plot" (Barth 1967: 89). On the contrary, every single life-story is a text made of multiple writings entering into many relations with other texts. Together with Michel Foucault, Barth believes that "what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic" (Foucault after Rothstein 1991: 114). The plot embodies for him everything that is "positive and multiple: difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems" (Foucault after Rothstein 1991: 114).

We have already said that Barth deliberately chooses the picaresque and panoramic eighteenth-century novel as his model. As it has been observed by Tobin, when juxtaposed with the neatness of the nineteenth–century realistic fiction, the eighteenth-century literature appears as a "house of fiction before the maid arrives" (1992: 57). Fielding, with his partial rejection of the Aristotelian rigidity, serves only as a springboard from which Barth jumps off toward an even greater narrative freedom. There is thus another eighteenth-century hypotext which leaves an even stronger imprint on the plot of Barth's *The sot-weed factor* than the novels of Fielding. Voltaire's *Candide,* for this is the work in question, displays cracks in its construction which take it a step closer to the labyrinthine plot of Barth's creations.

Candide serves Barth as a Genettian "matrix of imitation", a model of competence which underlies the novel and an architectural buttress on which *The sot-weed factor* leans. The striking correspondences between the two novels begin with the obvious similarities displayed by the Voltaire's and Barth's protagonists.

Ebenezer, with his naivete, innocence and poetic idealism is an American version of Candide. Both Candide and Eben are educated and introduced into the world by their tutors: Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire's book and Henry Burlingame in Barth's. Pangloss and Burlingame share a similar view of the world – both can be described as "cosmophilites" who accept and love the world as it is with all its good and evil, although Burlingame surpasses Pangloss as the "Embracer of all Contradictories" resolved to go through all possible experience. Cooke's love, a London whore named Joan Toast and his servant Bernard are

postmodern reorchestrations of Voltaire's female character Mlle Cunegonde and Candide's servant Cacambo. The Old Woman from Voltaire's plot resembles Mary Mungommory, a great raconteur, also known as "The Travelling Whore o' Dorset", who tells Eben an interesting story of her life.

The affinities go even further as they embrace also the events that constitute the axis of the French philosophical romance and that of Barth's book. Both plots are gregarious and to repeat Barth's own words –"fantastically baroque" (Bellamy 1974: 7). Peripety, discovery and suffering – the three obligatory elements of the Aristotelian plot – are being constantly abused and pushed to their extremes. By piling up an incredible number of extreme misfortunes, harrowing adventures, heaped-up horrors and coincidences, fortune reversals, miraculous escapes and survivals, Voltaire violates the principles of probability and coherence. What is of particular interest here is the fact that Voltaire does not seek the justification for the turns of the events in the structure of the novel. The narrator is also much less considerate towards the reader than that of Fielding's as he does not come up with a ready explanation of the authors decisions. What brings the action together lies outside the novel.

The driving force of *Candide* is a refutation of the Leibnitzian philosophy which claimed that we live in the best of all possible worlds and that even evil and misfortunes serve to compose the general good. Leibnitz wrote that "the world is not only the most admirable of machines ... it is also the best of republics, the one which brings men as much as possible the happiness and joy which make their physical perfection" (1840: 149). The German philosopher proposed a mechanical and mathematical interpretation of the world, reducing complex ideas to simple ones and organising them into a clear system of verifiable truth.

From this ordered and rational concept of the world stemmed Leibnitz's attempt to reconcile Christian faith in the goodness of God and the growing doubts concerning the existence of evil. He argued that if by definition the mind of God is perfect, it rules out any possibility of error in its creations (Brooks 1964: 24). What's more, the philosopher believed in the perpetual progress of civilisation and the advancement of mankind, claiming that error and misfortune are a necessary part of it (Brooks 1964: 45).

Voltaire questioned that view attacking Leibnitz for his too blindly optimistic and anti-Christian belief that "Tout est bien". In *Candide* we watch this thesis of optimism, or rather its abstract coldness, being constantly ridiculed. By multiplying adventures and adversities Voltaire shows that the universe is not ordered and harmonious but rather, to use Pascal's words, "the universe is dumb, man without light, abandoned to his own devices, lost in his corner of the earth, and unable to say who put him there or why, or what will come of him after death" (Brailsford 1966: 54). As a result, Candide has to face a real obstacle race in search of his lover: the sudden departure with Cunegunde, the crude horrors of

the wars of the Bulgarians and the Arabs, the earthquake at Lisbon, the brutalities of the Inquisition and the adventure's of a Pope's illegitimate child among Moorish Pirates, the brief sojourn in mythic El Dorado followed by sophisticated corruptions of Paris where he is robbed of his treasure, the journey to Venice and Constantinopole and finally, the somewhat disappointing reunion with his youthful passion who has long lost her charms and with "her tender cover all brown, eyes blood-shot, flat chest, cheeks wrinkled, arms red and chapped" does not resemble his beautiful Cunegunde (Voltaire 1991: 164). The estate which Candide buys in the end, brings him only an illusionary peace for no Eden inhabited by humans can ever be perfect.

Hence, the garden which the protagonists resolve to cultivate implies rather the limitations of men and their resistance to moral reform than the Leibnitzian dream of progress. Candide's lady grows ugly and repulsive, and becomes more bitter every day, the Old Woman complains about her infirmities, Cacambo also curses his destiny and Pangloss broods over his lost chance of becoming a famous philosopher. On top of all these misfortunes the two viziers and the mufti are strangled nearby and several of Candide's friends are impaled. Our disillusioned hero has to give up his naive innocence and face the reality of evil. The world is thus far from being "the best of all possible worlds" as the human fate is not a meaningful and coherent plot leading to a happy denouement. Rather, it is a game of chance, to use Voltaire's own words – "the sport of death, of hazard's stroke the prey" (Voltaire, quoted in Brailsford 1966: 84).

Barth makes free use of the incidents from Voltaire's plot which serves as a matrix for his playful distortions. His imitation of Voltaire's style is conspicuous. If we consider the lengthy chapter titles in *Candide* and *The sot-weed factor,* we cannot overlook their striking resemblance. They constitute a self-contained plot summarising the course of events. Chapter Fourteen in Barth's novel can serve as an illustration of this argument: "The Laureate is Exposed to Two Assassinations of Character, a Piracy, a Near-Deflowering, a Near-Mutiny, and an Appalling Colloquy Between Captains of the Sea, All Within the Space if a Few Pages" (Barth 1967: 222), for it is an echo of Chapter Five in the French novel, whose heading is built according to a similar rule: "Tempest, Shipwreck, Earthquake and What Became of Dr. Pangloss, Candide and Anabaptist Jacques" (Voltaire 1991: 197).

The influence of Voltaire is quite overt and extends over the whole plot. Eben and Candide go through very similar experiences. Cooke also quixotically idealises a woman, unconsciously triggering the events which destroy her. Being in love with his twin sister, Anna, he vows to remain a virgin and rejects Joan Toast, a London whore on whom he projects his feelings towards his sibling. He also searches for his own El Dorado embodied by Maryland. As it was in the case of Candide, its idyll turns out to be only an illusion as it reminds rather of

Voltaire's corrupted Paris than the utopian El Dorado. During his travel to Maryland, Eben many times miraculously escapes death, witnesses horrors of rapes and cruel murders, survives tempests, near-drowning, and imprisonment by Indians. His naive belief in human justice makes him interfere with a court in Maryland, which results in the loss of his father's ownership of Malden. When he finally regains his family estate by marrying Joan Toast, it appears as a somewhat bitter Garden of Eden, "a verminous province" with "nothing but scoundrels and perverts, hovels, and brothels, corruption and poltroonery" (Barth 1966: 457). The dwellers of that "El Dorado" cultivate sex, opium and wickedness. Eben's "Eve" is also rather disappointing for, when he finds her, she is an old, embittered and opium-addicted whore with a contagious venereal disease. By consummation of his marriage Eben is disabused of his chastity and just like for Candide, the loss is irrevocable. And just like Candide, he realises that "the very universe is naught but change and motion" (Barth 1966: 125-126); that man is nothing more than a "Chance's fool, the toy of aimless Nature – a mayfly fitting down the winds of Chaos" (Barth 1966: 344) and that "he should see the world as it is, for good and ill" (Barth 1967: 400).

As we have seen, the correspondences between *Candide* and *Sot-weed* on the level of plot are quite numerous. Barth is however less concerned with the philosophical depth and the moral message that Voltaire's book carries, but he definitely shares Voltaire's ironic attitude to the idea of representation. Both authors present their literary worlds from the position of labyrinth-makers who are able to retain an appropriate distance towards their constructs. The overt presence and intervention of the narratorial voice in the course of narration tint both novels with scepticism and reveal the artistic play with conventions and the reader's credibility. This labyrinthine multiplication of stories and narrators, sudden reversals of the events, fantastic adventures which lack any logical justification, the peculiar abundance of misfortunes, intricate plots and absurd coincidences cast a shadow on the ability to recreate reality as it is. By stripping the protagonists' actions and relations of the trappings of verisimilitude and apparent logic, the books describe the worlds which are a reaction to the impossibility of presenting the existing one (Czapliński 1997: 14).

Both novels begin like a typical *Bildungsroman*, but as they unfold, they defy the notion of progressive development which is replaced by the maze of "stories" and "strategies". In this way, Voltaire puts under suspicion the idea of the order based on the shaky foundations of Leibnitzian philosophy. Barth's novel, in turn, not only echoes these doubts by referring to Voltaire's novel in the palimpsestous way, but uses them to show that in the postmodern fictitious world, which is no longer supported by the rigid principles of unity and coherence, the Aristotelian edifice must crumble and fall.

The attempt to read *The sot-weed factor* filtered through its French matrix uncovers the enormous creative potential of both texts. *Candide* appears to us even more contemporary in its treatment of the narrative conventions and in the way it re-writes Barth's book.

As it has been observed by Eco, the contemporary fiction tries to dissolve the plot defined as a sequence of closely related events which inevitably lead to the final denouement (Eco 1989: 115). The world, perceived as diverse and chaotic, calls for the structure that would recognise reality not as a whole but as an intricate and open network of possibilities offering a variety of different and complementary solutions. Consequently, the plot does not strive at imitating experience, but, while revealing the world's complexity, it declares its own inadequacy as a mimetic device.

According to Scholes, Barth's delight in the art of story-telling places him among the "fabulators", whose aim is not " turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality" (1979: 45). Fabulators liberate the plot from its mimetic function postulated by Aristotle and rediscover its significance as a necessary element of the literary artifice. The plot is no longer coherent and unified but remains in an incessant motion, embraces time and space, establishing and at the same time breaking the links and relations that enable the reader to orient himself in the fictitious world. Barth expresses this notion using a metaphor of waves crashing ashore on a tidal beach. "The plot", writes the author of *Letters,* "surges up to a given point, then it seems to recede a little, then it crashes back upon the beach" (Reilly 1981: 111). In *Friday book*, he confesses that he is "in love with stories, at least as much as with language" (Barth 1984: 105), while the Traveling Whore o' Dorset, one of Barth's characters from *The sot-weed factor* seems to echo his words when she says:

> Ha! And the plot is tangled, d'ye say? Is't more knotful than the skein o'life, that a good tale tangles the better to unsnarl? ... Spin and tangle till the Dog-star sets i'the Bay; a tale well wrought is the gossip o'the gods, that see the heart and point o'life I 'Christ, I do love a story, sirs! (Barth 1967: 465).

Hutcheon notes that "we always tell stories – to escape, to remake, to alter our past and our future" (1984: 89). Life appears to us as random and diffuse whereas fiction is intentional and concentrated as it creates privileged worlds in which everything makes sense. "Everyone", argues the Doctor in Barth's *The end of the road*, "is necessarily the hero of his own life story ... we're the ones who conceive the story, and give other people the essences of minor characters. So in a sense, fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life" (Barth 1967: 83).

Ebenezer Cooke, the main hero of Barth's *The sot-weed factor*, suggests that it is the human memory that organises our perception of reality. At some point he says that memory is "the tread that runs through all the beads to make a necklace, or like Ariadne's thread, that she gave to the thankless Theseus, it marks my path through the labyrinth of Life, connects me with the starting place." (Barth 1967: 127). His friend Burlingame has a point when he questions Ebenezer's view. He stresses the selective and subjective nature of our memory. In fact, we remember only those things that we want to remember, for memory "even those things it holds, it tends to color" (Barth 1967: 127). It is rather, argues Burlingame, "as if Theseus at every turn rolled up the thread and laid it out again in a prettier pattern." (Barth 1967: 127). The protagonist reveals the essence of the labyrinthine story–telling which involves selecting, colouring and pattern-making. Reading of a text can be perceived as wandering in the multicursal maze in search of a clue to its pattern, a clue that would lead us to the centre hiding either a treasure of meaning or a monster of misunderstanding and confusion.

And it is Burlingame, the author's alter ego who embodies the anti-Aristotelian drive of Barth's narrative. He is the one who sets it "adrift by a continued pattern of digressions and interruptions" (Clavier 1991: 191), thus subverting and refuting the Aristotelian detailed recipe for a perfectly integral plot. Burlingame is the most mysterious and the least justified figure in the story. He appears in Eben's life from nowhere and disappears from it never to return. Having no past, he loses his link with history and devotes his life to the search of his progenitors. On one occasion he despairs over his lost identity:

> What a burden and despair to be a stranger to the world at large, and have not link with history! 'Tis as if I'd sprung de novo like a maggot out of meat, or dropped from the sky. Had I the tongue of angels I ne'er could tell you what a loneliness it is! (Barth 1967: 143).

Not knowing his creators at first, Burlingame, as it has been noted by Ziegler, "becomes a creator himself" (1987: 37). Like Fielding's narrator, he manipulates the plot and affects the course of events. Yet, what differs him from the narrator of *Tom Jones* is that his "plotting" does not keep the action on its unicursal track. Quite on the contrary, by imposing his intricate schemes on the lives of other characters and assuming various roles and masks, Burlingame complicates the plot even further and shatters its balance and unity. He turns the story into a nebulous game whose rules are to make the reading process less comfortable and put us back on guard. Fiction is not, Barth seems to be saying, a meaningful, truthful and realistic representation of life or "a secondhand tale about what might be real in another world" (Hutcheon 1984: xii). Instead, it is a

complex labyrinth which is "deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non-sequitur and incoherent" (Federman 1975: 14).

In treating the plot as "the obstacle race and the scavenger hunt" (1964: 485), Barth denies the possibility of reproducing life in all its multiplicity. He is acutely aware that the narrative cannot be consecutive and neatly unified without distorting a fundamental aspect of reality whose course is unpredictable and random. Reality goes far beyond the casual unfolding of the Aristotelian plot and it cannot be forced into a coherent and orderly frame. Therefore, Barth's plot "doesn't rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires" (Barth 1988: 95-96).

For Barth, argues Scholes, "life is tantalisingly fictitious a rough draft of what may be perfected as a supreme fiction" (1979: 119). His works prove that any attempt to impose order on the universe must inevitably result in the creation of fiction, for people prefer fictitious design to the recognition that reality is prevailingly unpredictable and incomprehensible. The plot complications of *The sot-weed factor* are "a representation of the distortion we normally make out of life by taking pains to find a pattern in its disorder" (Morell 1975: 113). By the use of various literary devices, and the emphasis on the conventional character of the plot, the author disavows the claim that literary language is transparent and that it yields the treasure of truth. Instead, he proves its power to create independent fictional worlds governed by different laws.

This ironical attitude towards "the literary reality" is the feature which Barth shares with both of his predecessors: Fielding and Voltaire. However, by accepting his fate as a "translator and annotator of pre-existing models" (Gerhard 1972: 30), the author *of The sot-weed factor* removes his work even further from the idea of faithful representation of life. John Stark points out that Barth's novel "produces the effect like the layers of Troy, with the newer obscuring the older." (1974: 130). Although written in the twentieth century, it

> ... goes back to the eighteenth century for its technique, then further back to the late seventeenth century for its main action and finally back to the seventeenth century for the action described in the journals of John Smith and Henry Burlingame (Stark 1974: 130-131).

Barth acknowledges the palimpsestous character of his work when he says that "it's about where the genre began, with Quixote imitating Amadis of Gaul, Cervantes pretending to be the Cid Hamete Benengeli (and Alonzo Quijano pretending to be Don Quixote), of Fielding parodying Richardson" (Barth 1984: 72). The author of *The sot-weed factor* outdsistances Fielding and Voltaire in his unrestrained passion for labyrinthine story-telling.

By "grafting" his text on the previously written works, Barth plunges into "the ceaseless circulation of texts without which literature would not be worth

one hour of exertion" (Genette 1997: 400). Although recognised as a pastiche, the imitative form in Genette's scheme, Barth's work does not lose anything of its originality. Quite on the contrary, it retains the unique force of the voice that shapes any re-telling. It appears that in Barth's case the pastiche has "the purgative and exorcising virtue", a necessary effect ascribed to a conscious and purposeful imitation by Marcel Proust. Proust explains the peculiar nature of a deliberate pastiche in these words:

> When we have just finished reading a book, not only do we wish we could continue to live with the characters ... but our own inner voice also which has been disciplined during the entire time of our reading to follow the rhythm of a Balzac or Flaubert, would like to continue to speak like them. We must let it do so for a moment, must let the pedal prolong the sound; that is we must do a deliberate pastiche, do that afterward we can become original once again and not do an involuntary pastiche for the rest of our lives (Proust, quoted after Genette 1997: 112).

Barth's pastiche is undoubtedly "voluntary" as the overt relations between *The sot-weed factor* and its hypotexts leave little doubt as to their deliberateness. He skilfully "prolongs the sound" by rediscovering the significance of the texts as a part of the totality of literature which is not a closed and finite repository of books, but a constant and dynamic process of "transfusion, a textual perfusion" (Genette 1997: 400). Barth wallows in that infinitude of the possible connections between texts which constitute that vast Library of Babel, to use Borgesian famous metaphor. The author, just like the Argentinean writer, delights in the conviction that "a book is not an isolated entity: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships" (Borges 1964: 35). The result is a hypertextual game whose goal is to attract and enchant all its participants, a game which is more than gratifying – it enables us to enter that palimpsestous "funhouse" and generate the magic play of texts' distorting reflections.

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